

**Exploring the Coping Methods Used by Agricultural Educators to Battle Occupational
Burnout**

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Introduction/Need for Research

The agricultural education field has experienced a teacher shortage over several decades, with many agriculture teachers leaving the profession due to various factors (Camp et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2024). Agricultural educators face unique demands beyond the typical challenges in teaching (Eck et al., 2019). High expectations from administration, curriculum standards, parents, and time commitments for events like state and county fairs, supervised agricultural experiences, and FFA activities contribute to their burnout and dissatisfaction (Traini et al., 2021). Relatedly, many agricultural educators cite job stress, poor mental health, lack of work-life balance, and student behavior as key factors leading to their exit from the field (Kitchel et al., 2012; Solomonson et al., 2018). Research on burnout within agricultural education noted the connection between burnout and teacher attrition, as well as highlighting agriculture teachers noted low and moderate levels of burnout (Chenevey et al., 2008; Kitchel et al., 2012).

The growing trend of teacher turnover continues to leave the agricultural education field struggling to retain quality educators. There is limited research looking at the effectiveness of the coping methods that agricultural educators utilize to battle burnout (Lawver & Smith, 2014). Investigating the current coping methods and levels of burnout will help provide insight into how agriculture teachers are currently managing and coping with the demands of their work.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the multidimensional theory of burnout and the transactional theory of stress and coping. The multidimensional theory of burnout defines burnout as a psychological syndrome impacted by depersonalization, decreased professional efficacy, and emotional exhaustion experienced by those who work in a social context (Maslach, 1998). Emotional exhaustion is when an individual feels they no longer have the emotional resources or energy to cope with job-related challenges due to the demands of their work environment. Depersonalization is the negative detached response to other people due to emotional exhaustion. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to a decline in productivity at work and a reduction in one's self-efficacy (Maslach, 1998). The transactional theory of stress and coping explains that stress arises from an imbalance between an individual's resources and environmental demands (Biggs et al., 2017). Coping involves cognitive appraisal and behavioral efforts to manage stress effectively. It includes strategies to handle stressful situations, categorized into problem-focused coping (resolving the stressor) and emotion-focused coping (managing emotional responses). The eight strategies—planful problem-solving, self-controlling, seeking social support, distancing, positive reappraisal, escape-avoidance, accepting responsibility, and confrontative coping—address the stressor directly or manage emotions (Biggs et al., 2017; Folkman et al., 1986).

Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive quantitative approach to determine the level of burnout experienced by agricultural educators and the coping methods they employ. A stratified random sampling method was used in regions three and four of the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE). A total of 500 agricultural teachers were invited to participate through Qualtrics, and after accounting for 43 bounced emails, the final sample size was 457. The response rate for the survey was 22%, with a total of 77 usable responses. The survey invitation was sent four times via email, following Dillman et al.'s (2014) Tailored Design Method for Internet Surveys. The online survey instrument utilized previously validated instruments: the

Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educators (MBI-ES; Maslach & Jackson, 1981) to assess agricultural educators' burnout levels and the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) to evaluate the eight coping methods agricultural educators employed. A panel of experts, including faculty and educators, reviewed the instrument for face and content validity.

Results

Table 1

Levels of Burnout of Agricultural Educators

Subscale	Mean
Reduced Personal Accomplishment	4.46
Emotional Exhaustion	3.20
Depersonalization	1.81

Note. 0 = never; 1 = a few times a year or less; 2 = once a month or less; 3 = a few times a month; 4 = once a week; 5 = a few times a week; 6 = every day.

Table 2

Coping Methods of Agricultural Educators

Construct	Mean
Planful Problem-Solving	1.73
Self-Controlling	1.71
Seeking Social Support	1.46
Accepting Responsibility	1.36
Distancing	1.32
Confrontative Coping	1.20
Positive Reappraisal	1.12
Escape-Avoidance	0.89

Note. 0 = does not apply or not used; 1 = used somewhat; 2 = used quite a bit; 3 = used a great deal.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The results revealed that agricultural educators in NAAE regions three and four are experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion and moderate levels of depersonalization (Maslach, 1998). The respondents predominantly used problem-focused coping strategies, with self-controlling and planful problem-solving being used more frequently. These findings conclude that educators address burnout through active, solution-oriented methods rather than emotion-focused strategies, which may leave unresolved emotional stress. Similar to Chenevey et al. (2008), our study shows significant emotional exhaustion, and like Kitchel et al. (2012), the reliance on problem-focused coping could contribute to unresolved burnout and higher turnover intentions. The type of coping methods reported in this study are different than Utah agriculture teachers who more frequently used distancing coping strategies (Lawver & Smith, 2014) versus the more self-controlled methods. The implications of these findings indicate that educators have changed in burnout levels and coping strategies used and may need additional emotional support to manage burnout effectively. We recommend future research to examine the relationships between levels of burnout and coping methods, as well as the impact on turnover intention.

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